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SUBJECT: YUNNAN CHRISTIANITY GROWING, GOVERNMENT ATTITUDE IMPROVING

CHENGDU 00000030 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The number of Christians in Yunnan Province continues to grow, both among government-approved congregations and illegal "house churches," the Pastor of a large church in Kunming told us recently. 80 percent of adherents in Yunnan belong to ethnic minorities, though Christianity is spread fairly evenly across the province. The government's attitude toward religion is improving, though it continues to "hit hard" against house churches, and appears to favor "traditional" Chinese religions over Christianity. Though himself an important figure in Yunnan's official church, the pastor said both government-approved and house churches are necessary, and that they should be united in their desire to be left alone by the government. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Consul General and PolEconOff met January 18 with Jing Jiuwei, pastor of the Kunming City International Trinity Church. A third-generation Christian originally from Hebei whose uncle was a house church leader, Jing graduated in the 1980s among the first class of a government-approved seminary in Beijing before moving to Yunnan, where he now presides over a very large government-approved church in Kunming (i.e. part of the Three Selves Patriotic Protestant Association). (Note: In 2007, ConGenOff visited St. John's, another large Three Selves church in Kunming, see ref A. End Note.)

Christianity Popular, Growing in Yunnan

¶3. (U) There are currently roughly 800,000 Christians in Yunnan, Jing said, making it among the top ten Chinese provinces for numbers of Christian adherents. (Note: Official government statistics report the number to be over one million. End Note.)

Reasons for the popularity of Christianity in Yunnan include extensive foreign contact dating to the 19th century, as well as the religion's popularity among China's ethnic minorities -- 80 percent of Yunnan's Christians belong to ethnic minorities, Jing said. Geographic distribution of Christians across the province is fairly even, he added. (Note: A 2003 Kunming Religious Affairs Bureau report on the religious situation in Kunming sketched the city's religious demographics. The report counted in Kunming and adjacent counties subordinate to Kunming "more than 350,000 religious believers or about 7.2 percent of Kunming's population. These people include believers in Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and

Catholicism. About 60 percent of believers belong to national minorities." Ref B describes Party and government strategies for controlling religious communities in Kunming and the challenges they face. End Note.)

14. (SBU) In the provincial capital of Kunming, there are currently 50-60,000 Christians, including both those who attend the government-approved Three Selves churches (self-governing, self-financing, and self-propagating) and illegal "house churches." Jing said he is not familiar with every house church in the city, but his wife, who runs his church's religious bookshop, frequently meets people who mention they belong to house churches of which Jing was previously unaware. Growth rates among government-approved and house churches are about the same, he noted, increasing by about 10 percent per year.

15. (U) Jing's own congregation has doubled in size in the past five years, growing to 6,000 -- so many that they needed to build a bigger church. (Comment: Jing's existing three-story church can fairly be described as massive, with a huge main floor and a sanctuary with two large theater-type balconies reachable by elevator. End Comment.) The old church had a maximum capacity of 600, whereas the new one can hold 1,700 during any of its three Sunday services. Since the new church was built, more people have started coming, he said, though some just out of interest in the attractive building itself. Every Christian group in Kunming is working hard to attract new followers, Jing continued, and his own congregation is starting to see more people with advanced degrees showing interest, though in terms of age the congregation remains evenly split among young, middle-age, and older attendees.

CHENGDU 00000030 002 OF 002

16. (U) Jing noted that in addition to a government-approved seminary in Kunming, others exist in the Yunnan cities of Dali, Baoshan, Nujiang, and Qujing. The Kunming program runs for two-three years, with a total school size of about 100 students (just over 30 students in each class); each student must be approved by the government.

Government Attitude Toward Christianity Improving

17. (SBU) The PRC government's attitude toward Christianity is getting progressively better, Jing said, mostly because officials realize they cannot contain the religion's growth. The government is, however, still "hitting hard" at the house churches. Jing gave a few examples, including the case of a friend of his who was jailed in Lifeng City in Shanxi Province for organizing house churches. The government's attitude toward Buddhism and Daoism, as "traditional" Chinese religions, is better than that toward Christianity, a foreign import, he said. (Note: Buddhism, too, is a foreign import from India, though albeit a much earlier one. End Note.)

18. (SBU) Commenting on his own relations with city and provincial authorities, Jing said he had a very good relationship with Kunming Vice Mayor Du Ming (ref C). Du's attitude toward religion in recent years has been very good, particularly toward Christianity. Jing repeated a statement by Du regarding his desire to build more churches instead of jails, echoing Du's remarks to Consul General during a September

meeting. Jing also said Kunming Party Secretary Qiu He is doing many good things for the city in terms of development and, like Du, has a positive attitude toward religion.

¶9. (SBU) A current challenge associated with the church's growth, Jing said, is the need for more space for worship. Christian leaders in Kunming are currently, for example, renting a house for a new government-approved church at the cost of RMB 100,000 (USD 15,000) per year. Jing recounted a story from 2007, when he met with Du and several other government officials at the church and raised this very topic. In front of 200 people, Du asked Jing much land the church needed, to which Jing replied, "Whatever land you give me, I'll fill." Du offered them 10 mu (roughly 0.667 hectares) at the market price of RMB 400,000 per mu. When Du asked whether the church had this much money, Jing said no, but if the government would provide the land for free, the congregation would use its own funds to build a new church building. Du agreed. The church has yet to receive the land, but Jing is convinced the deal will be honored.

¶10. (SBU) Jing's only complaint toward the government, in addition to comments about "hitting hard" against house churches, was in regards to government interference in church decisions over selecting leaders for Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches. Jing said both the government-approved and house churches have their good and bad points, but "both are necessary." "We can eat together and neither want the government beating us down." BROWN